Conroy, K. M., & McCarthy, L. (2019). Abroad but not abandoned: Supporting student adjustment in the international placement journey. *Studies in Higher Education*. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1673718

Kieran M. Conroy[a] and Lucy McCarthy[a*]

[a] *Queen's Management School, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, UK*

**Lucy McCarthy, l.mccarthy@qub.ac.uk. Queen's Management School, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, BT95EE, UK*

Biographical notes

Kieran M. Conroy is an Assistant Professor in International Management at Queen's University Belfast Management School. He has also held a visiting position at ESC La Rochelle Business School. His work focuses on exploring the intersection between international strategy and global mobility, specifically how the flow of knowledge and people impacts strategy development in multinational companies. He has published in journals such as *Journal of World Business*, *Global Strategy Journal* and *British Journal of Management*, and he is currently a Member of the Editorial Board for the *Journal of World Business*. He is the Program Director for the BSc International Business with a Language and teaches modules in the area of Global Business, International Strategy and International HRM.

Lucy McCarthy is an Assistant Professor at Queen's University Belfast Management School. Her current research focuses on exploring contextual issues in supply chain networks, she is interested in critical and action research approaches in this area. Her background is in community and rural development, particularly around challenges of historically marginalised areas. Recent work has explored issues related to transparency and to the adoption of environmental and social practices in supply chains. Her work has been published in top management journals such as *Organization, Journal of Business Ethics, MIT Sloan Management Review, Production Planning and Control and Supply Chain Management: An International Journal.* She is the Advisor of Studies for the BSc International Business with a Language and teaches modules in the areas of Research Methods, Business and Society, and Applied International Business.

Abroad but not abandoned: Supporting student adjustment in the international placement journey

International work placements are an increasingly important way for universities to enhance their internationalisation strategies and develop student learning. However, the increase in student mobility internationally has not been paralleled in the level of support received from the university when undertaking international placements. Using an action research qualitative design, we explore how students may be supported in effectively managing international placements. Data was collected from UK Business School students through focus groups, interviews and reflections. Findings identify a variety of important support structures that can be implemented to aid students in adjusting to three main challenges; professional, cultural and personal. We argue that these supports need to be developed across three interrelated stages in the international placement process; pre-departure, post-arrival and repatriation.

Keywords: international placement; student support; adjustment; reflective practice; student mobility

1.0 Introduction

Internationalisation is an increasingly important objective for most higher education universities in the UK (Seeber, Meoli, and Cattaneo 2018). Equally, enhancing employability is a key objective for Business School graduates, reflected in the focus on developing transferable skills embedded in the learning outcomes of degrees (Succi and Canoci 2019). As such, the dual push for internationalization and employability has created a context where universities are increasingly seeking to improve their 'student mobility' to enhance 'global citizenship' (Roy et al. 2018; Sison and Brennan 2012). As a result, the majority of Business School students are now required to undertake international (work) placements, often referred to as 'sandwich placements' or 'international internships', which involve working abroad for a period of their degree (D'abate, Youndt, and Wenzel 2009). Despite this spike, we lack understanding about how international placements are supported, as much of the research in this space is focused on internships in the home country or study abroad schemes (Waibel et al. 2017).

There is a wide range of literature that demonstrates the advantages of undertaking placements as a form of experiential learning (Baden and Parkes 2013; Liu, Xu, and Weitz 2011; Smith et al. 2007). Students who take advantage of these opportunities are highly motivated and have the potential to avail of significant learning opportunities (Aamaas, Duesund, and Lauritzen 2019). Students can develop a greater sense of cultural awareness post placement (Batey and Lupi 2012) due to exposure to new or alternative ways of working. Brooks and Youngson (2014) found that students with placement experience will have higher employment rates, higher starting salaries and improved academic performance. Despite this, business students in particular are confronted with significant challenges when undertaking international placements,

which have the potential to disrupt the value of the learning experience (Gerken et al. 2012). Much of the literature considers these challenges in the form of adjustment (Stitts 2006).

Acknowledged as one of the greatest challenges facing individuals working overseas, adjustment involves the ability to effectively adapt in a new environment (Shay and Baack 2004). Cross-cultural adjustment is its most significant form and manifests in both work and non-work contexts, with issues such as language ability and personality traits influencing this process (Peltokorpi 2008). Business placement students face challenges in adjusting to new cultures with failure to do so leading to cultural misunderstandings that produce culture shock (Toncar and Cudmore 2000). Students also face professional adjustment challenges as they transition to new professional identities where they have to manage new roles, tasks and colleagues. Personal adjustment challenges also arise in this context, for example this may be their first prolonged experience abroad where they have to independently navigate a new city, which may exacerbate stress or mental health issues (Cage et al. 2018). A major consideration here involves understanding how students can be effectively supported in managing the adjustment challenges faced on international placement (Aamaas, Duesund, and Lauritzen 2019; Waibel et al. 2017). More work is needed on the specific support structures that enable students to realise the value of international placements (Tymon 2013). Our central research question considers; *how may students be supported in effectively managing international placements?*

Our study makes three important contributions. First, we identify a variety of support structures to help students manage the challenges associated with undertaking an international placement. Second, we find support for organising these structures around the three main adjustment challenges experienced; professional, cultural and

personal. Third, supports to address these adjustment challenges need to be developed across three interrelated stages in the placement process; pre-departure stage, post-arrival stage and the repatriation stage. By drawing on insights from international management, we find that viewing international placements as a three stage process provides guidance for university staff in structuring support throughout the student placement journey. Effective support structures are critical to ensure learning for students as they transition between stages. It also allows for students to anticipate and reflect on ways to overcome significant challenges they may face. We present a review of relevant studies on international placements before detailing the methods employed. We structure our findings and contributions around the three main types of supports identified.

2.0 International placements – A three stage learning process

Studies in higher education have explored the importance of study abroad or work experience, with lesser focus on the significance of international work placements for student learning. These international placements vary in their structure, with some universities integrating them so that placement is assessed as part of the degree program (Clark 2003). In this context it is likely students will receive more university support when placed abroad. However, we argue a more effective way to surmount the challenges of international placement is to view it as a three stage process; pre-departure, post-arrival (in-country), and repatriation (re-entry or return to study). This process echoes research in international management on how best to support individuals working abroad (Conroy, McDonnell, and Holzleitner 2018).

Literature in international management details the importance of pre-departure training for managers prior to international assignment (Puck, Kittler, and Wright 2008;

Selmer 2001). Similarly, students face challenges prior to international placement such as pre-placement anxiety, leading to increased stress and mental wellbeing issues (Gelman and Baum 2010). Roberts (1998) found that students risk being placed in 'sink or swim' scenarios unless provided with necessary supports to overcome cultural misunderstandings prior to departure. For example, students may find themselves in awkward situations, experiencing misunderstandings about expectations regarding attire, non-verbal communication or timing of meetings (Roberts 1998). Intercultural interactions are an important part of international placements with research illustrating that intercultural competence programs can help students develop intercultural sensitivity (Hiller and Wozniak 2009). Dunlap and Mapp (2016) found that pre-departure classes focused on cross-cultural learnings can help students adapt to a new culture. Although research points to the importance of part-time work as an ad hoc way to prepare students for professional adjustment on placement (Neill et al. 2004), most students do not have prolonged professional experience and risk facing significant challenges in the transition from their studies into a work placement. Workplace inductions can help students in settling into their new roles and adjusting professionally (Pedro 1984). International management research also details the importance of pre-departure cross-cultural training in the form of cultural briefings, practical information sessions, practical manuals, health and safety awareness and simulations (Conroy, McDonnell, and Holzleitner 2018). In general, if accurate expectations are managed prior to placement it is likely that individuals will be more effective while working overseas (Caliguiri et al. 2001).

Post-arrival support for individuals working abroad are critical for ensuring adjustment challenges are addressed (Selmer 2001). When students arrive in-country they can suffer from similar difficulties such as isolation, limiting their ability to

develop cross-cultural learning and exacerbating mental health stresses (Cage et al. 2018). The geographical distance of international placements creates a sense of risk for the student (and the university) and closing this distance is critical to enhancing the students learning experience (Fox 2017). Technology can help manage this distance anxiety but face-to-face interaction is often a more valuable and important support mechanism for the student (Aamaas, Duesund, and Lauritzen 2019). While on placement students may risk experiencing professional rejection if they are unable to effectively adjust to their new working environment, failing to break free from their student identity (Crabtree et al. 2015). Other work has detailed the importance of social support in the form of shared mentors from university and the placement company in helping the placement student adjust accordingly (Stewart and Knowles 2003). Effective adjustment increases the capacity of students to hone their cultural and language abilities for graduate schemes in international business (Prestwich and Ho-Kim 2008). These potential challenges denote the importance of continued support for students when they have arrived in-country. Ultimately, research in international management demonstrates that a combination of both pre-departure and post-arrival support is the most effective way to support individuals working abroad (Conroy, McDonnell, and Holzleitner 2018; Selmer, 2001).

Third, repatriation or returning home, is identified in the international management literature as the most difficult stage in the process of managing individuals working abroad (Lazarova and Cerdin 2007). Reverse culture shock is a significant challenge, where individuals find it difficult to ‘re-adjust’ to their home culture often due to a shift in their values. Research also shows that students face similar re-entry challenges (Toncar and Cudmore 2000). For example, re-adjusting from their professional working environment to an academic context in final year can create

issues, particularly in the first few weeks of study. Auburn (2007) found a separation existed between 'academic and practical arenas', where students struggled to apply placement experiences to their final year of study, due in part to non-supportive academic staff. Students also need sufficient opportunities for reflection and processing upon returning to realise the value of the learnings they have developed (Carson and Fisher 2006). However much of the work in this area focuses on the importance of reflective report writing on assignment. The ability to develop and apply their intercultural competence to their studies offers career progression opportunities both at home and abroad (Orahood, Kruze, and Pearson 2004; Sison and Brennan 2012). The repatriation stage of an international placement is often overlooked in terms of how best students can be supported to set them up for success in final year of study as well as for a career after university (Aamaas, Duesund, and Lauritzen 2019).

Building on the aforementioned shortcomings in the literature on international placement in higher education, and applying insights from studies in international management, we aim to explore how students are supported in effectively managing international placements.

3.0 Methods

The research was conducted at one large UK University and adopted a multi-method qualitative approach framed within an action research methodology. Qualitative research allowed us to 'collaborate directly with participants' (Creswell and Poth 2018) and our approach consisted of focus groups, interviews and reflective journals. The use of multi-methods is advocated in management research to overcome limitations associated with any one approach (Bryman 2006) and can facilitate the representation of a diversity of views. Action research methodologies allow for the co-production of 'practical solutions to issues facing people' (Reason and Bradbury 2001). It sees

continuous iterations of problem identification, planning, action and evaluation as outlined in Figure 1. Due to its emergent and iterative nature, it is a process of inquiry designed to develop solutions to real organisational problems generating implications for participants and the organisation beyond the research project (Coghlan 2001) thus allowing for generalisability to other contexts. Attributed to Lewin (1946), it has been widely used in education research due to its participatory nature, aiding to instigate the co-creation of change from the 'middle out' thus moving away from solely 'top-down' or 'bottom up' approaches to improve effectiveness (Hodgson, May, and Marks-Maran 2008). This approach can help redress the traditional power imbalance between researchers and participants through their deconstruction, empowering participants through its collaborative nature and embedded reflexivity (Touboulic and Walker 2016; Hodgson, May, and Marks-Maran 2008). Throughout this process we also consulted with placement coordinators in the School responsible for the administrative placement component, as well as company mentors and directors.

---------- *Figure 1 to be inserted about here* ----------

3.1 Data collection

This process engaged students undertaking a BSc in International Business with a Language. All students were UK nationals and were required to spend 9 months minimum - 12 months maximum on international placement. The data collection followed a number of steps with data being collected across several groups of students and points in time as detailed in Table 1.

Prior to empirical data collection, an initial analysis was conducted by the researchers to map and understand the existing support services being offered by the School, which highlighted space for further supports and eliminated redundant supports. Combined with empirical data we sought to explore the divergence between the

expected, perceived and actual delivery of supports in addressing the 'gaps' surfaced by the students (Parasuraman et al. 1985; Davis, Shekhar, and Van Auken 2002).

This primary research consisted of two broad pre-intervention stages. In the first stage, we conducted focus groups with two student cohorts, (32 students in total) upon their re-entry to university post placement (Focus groups 1 and 2). Focus groups are particularly useful to explore shared experiences and provide increased learning opportunities from participant interaction (Kitzinger 1994). These 32 students also wrote reflections, which allowed for the consideration of 'the process of [their] own learning' with purpose (Moon 1999) from their placement. Reflecting on experiences increases insights garnered from the placements, enabling students to critically review behaviours and engage in personal development; this process can create generalisations that allow for future challenges to be addressed based on this prior learning (Gibbs 1988; Moon 1999). These reflective reports were included in the data-set for analysis.

In the second pre-intervention stage, which ran parallel to the first, we conducted (45) semi-structured face-to-face interviews with two different cohorts on placement. These interviews were conducted after approximately 6 months and sought to surface student experiences of adjustment in a post-arrival context i.e. the challenges they faced, as well as how they were overcoming these. In both stages issue identification was led by the participants with the facilitators guiding the process to encourage participants to think about perceived and real challenges faced. Action research creates clarity about the expected take-aways for participants from the project (Eden and Huxham 1996) and in co-producing solutions, the researchers were able to bound the suggestions in what was feasible in terms of the university led processes and that which would be student led. For the post-intervention stage, we conducted survey interviews with 22 students (level 2) to determine how confident they felt about going

on international placement and how the pre-departure supports had helped them. We also administered survey interviews to 21 final year students to surface their view on the utility of repatriation supports. Participatory action research methods allow for evaluation post-intervention facilitating ongoing interactions between the researchers and the researched.

Reflective practice and reflexivity was employed by the researchers and extended to the participants. This is of increased importance in situations where students are the participants as power imbalances may be more pronounced. These practices can help shift the focus from the dominant perspective, moving away from more traditional 'third-person research' (Bradbury and Lichtenstein 2000). It encourages us to embed discussions of values with our students, it also reminds us as educators, we need to practice reflexivity and be mindful of our own positionality and influence (Touboulic and McCarthy, 2019; Deutsch 2004). It provides scope to consider how to respond in certain situations and space to consider the ethicality of the researcher (Guillemin and Gillam 2004).

The participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage of the process in line with good ethical practice (Diener and Chandall 1978**)** and the employment of reflexive practices strengthens the overall ethical aspect of the research. All participants gave informed consent and were invited to follow-up at any stage. The data was recorded and transcribed with pseudonyms applied to protect identities. Extensive notes were taken by the researchers as a source of reference and reflection.

3.2 Data analysis

Our data were analysed in accordance with an inductive approach and followed the logic of thematic based analysis. Thematic analysis involves the identification of key themes or central ideas that emerge from the data and informed the phenomenon of

the study (Nowell et al. 2017). While data gathering and analysis is to a point reductionist, as researchers we aim to reflect the key themes and subthemes emerging from our analysis and do justice to the voices of the participants by following the practice of thematic analysis. Within our analysis we structured our broad themes in the context of the 3 types of adjustment, and each of these were characterised and informed by a variety of sub themes surfaced from the coding and the literature. Moreover, each of these sub themes were aligned to the central problems that students faced while on placement. For example, in terms of personal adjustment, sub themes were identified as health, accommodation, navigating the city, safety, counselling, making friends etc. Therefore, identifying the broader themes and related subthemes allowed us to generate effective intervention mechanisms aligned to each of these. Insights in international management literature (Conroy, McDonnell, and Holzleitner 2018) served as 'guiding logics' in determining which supports were more suitable across the three stages of the placement process. Both researchers coded the data independently. We then discussed our codes, refining and collapsing as we progressed. Finally, we came to an agreement on key themes that had emerged from the data (Conroy, Collings, and Clancy 2017). In carrying out this process, we drew on insights from others on the significance of thematic analysis for analysing and structuring qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2006; King et al. 2004).

---------- Table 1 to be inserted about here ----------

4.0 Findings

We structure our findings in accordance with the three main adjustment dimensions; professional, cultural, personal, and within the context of the three main stages of the placement; pre-departure, post-arrival and repatriation. Further, we detail the challenges

that students surfaced and the support structures introduced to address these. Table 2 provides a summary of the supporting structures discussed in this section. All of the listed support structures were implemented in response to pre-intervention stage empirical findings. Below we provide a general overview of the type international placement that the students in our study experienced.

A 'typical' international placement experience for the students in our study involved relocating for 9 months minimum, with most students returning home by 12 months. Locations were generally cosmopolitan cities (e.g. Madrid, Barcelona, and Paris), and students were typically employed by multinational companies from those countries. Students tended to work in the city, often in close proximity to others from their University. On occasion they would live together and most lived with a mix of fellow students and locals. Students effectively worked as 'interns', usually in HR or marketing functions, with administrative focused duties such as; arranging recruitment and selection processes, inducting new employees, creating initiatives for brand development or organising company marketing events. Students regularly worked as part of a multicultural team, which largely consisted of a mix of full time employees and interns from other Universities. A mentor from the local country led these teams. Team meetings were often conducted in English, due to their multicultural composition, but other correspondence such as emails, telephone calls and one-on-one mentor meetings were held in the local language. Their typical workday consisted of 8am-6pm, with a 1-hour lunch break.

4.1 Professional adjustment

4.1.1 Challenges and support structures

Professional adjustment emerged as a significant theme in the data analysis process. For

the purpose of our study, we define this as the ability of the student to effectively adapt to working in a professional setting. The gap analysis identified a number of professional support shortages, for example, students frequently conducted independent placement searches at level 2, with little or no formalised guidance. They often missed application deadlines and failed to secure desired placement opportunities. Some respondents on placement described the absence of formal training or inductions upon arrival, with others lacking a formal company mentor. Recent returnees often struggled to comprehend the relevance of their placement position to their degree and had further difficulty reflecting on how the skills they developed would be relevant professionally. These challenges are reflected in the quotes below:

> 'It would be better if there were more variety of jobs available' (Focus group 1)

> 'I found my own placement and sorted it all out myself' (Focus group 1)

> 'Visits from somebody who was relevant to or knew the course would be helpful' (Focus group 1)

> 'There needs to be more support before and during placement' (Student interview)

Based on the identified deficits, a number of supports were introduced to address professional adjustment challenges across the three main placement stages. First, in a pre-departure context, the main platform for channelling these supports was the creation of a formal International Placement Preparation (IPP) module for level 2 students. This module was delivered weekly across both semesters (24 weeks). The module had a dedicated coordinator and invited guest speakers focused on professional issues. For example, Insight Events facilitated companies from international markets to digitally or physically brief students on placement opportunities, outlining the company's expectations. A dedicated website was created for Business School students leading to

more relevant placement advertisements, increased awareness and options. Other supports in this space involved increasing the amount and awareness of summer internship opportunities available to post level 1 students through dedicated LinkedIn, CV and career service workshops.

In a post-arrival context, supports were channelled through the creation of a formalised 'sense-checking' structure. Here, a number of formal contact-points were established with students on placement. These are detailed in Table 2, and these contact-points were driven through both administrative and academic liaisons with a focus on ensuring professional adjustment. These sense-checks acted as reflective opportunities for students to comment on their professional development, discuss their mentor relationship, further training needs or any larger problems within their role that necessitated action by the liaison. Further to this, all companies are now vetted to ensure the provision of formal training and a formal work mentor to guide the student through their placement. Any companies not meeting the criteria are screened and removed from placement listings. Students often noted difficulties in raising sensitive issues with their mentors, here the mid-way visits acted as safe space for students to raise concerns, which were subsequently addressed between the academic and the mentor. These points are signified in following quotes:

> 'It helped to have a familiar face and someone showing genuine interest in our experience rather than just being sent off and forgotten about for a year' (Student interview)

> '…it reassured us that there is still help when we need it' (Student interview)

> 'My mentor was very encouraging, whilst also giving me space to use my initiative and solve problems on my own and learn from them' (Student interview)

Third, in a repatriation context, a dedicated 'reintegration workshop' was delivered. This provided returning students with a space for reflection on their professional learnings as well a platform to debrief and share these with their placement counterparts (Gibbs 1988) which encourage deeper reflection. A brainstorming format was implemented to generate and share student insights. This involved engaging groups of students to reflect on the main challenges of their placements. Students performed this reflection individually then in sub groups, documenting their ideas on flip charts and sharing these with the rest of the class. This is one of the student-centred strategies that can be used to increase contributions by all participants and actively engage students through smaller workshop style groupings (Sadler 2012; Goodlad 1997). A programme specific alumni group was also established and past students were invited to share their international experiences with returning students where they outlined how their learning helped them gain employment and develop their careers. University Careers Services were also enlisted for dedicated sessions to reinforce how students could develop their CVs, highlighting their international experience and improve their interviewing techniques to find a graduate role, as suggested in the quote below.

> 'It reminded me of just what a great experience I had and the opportunities it has provided for me as I leave [university]. It allowed me to also reflect on how my placement abroad influenced the future career I want…' (Student interview).

4.2 Cultural adjustment

4.2.1 Challenges and support structures

Cultural adjustment emerged as another key theme, we define this as the ability of the student to effectively adapt to working in a new cultural setting. Students outlined numerous support insufficiencies surrounding cultural adjustment, identified in the

quotes below. In the focus groups, students noted they had not received any cultural training prior to departing. As part of their degree, students undertake one language module per semester, this was focused on grammar, oral and writing skills, and largely inapplicable to a business setting. Placements often did not compensate for this with many students lamenting that the companies' lingua franca were generally English with an absence of opportunities to practice their chosen language. Our focus groups also surfaced the inability to understand the relevance and applicability of their cultural learnings to their degrees and careers.

> 'In Barcelona, English was a problem…everything you did was through English or Catalonian' (Focus group 1)

> 'I did an intercambio, it was really useful, so recommending that would help' (Student reflection)

In response to the above insights, interventions were developed to support students. First, in a pre-departure context, a new language module was developed in the form of a business cursio, focused on cultural and language issues within a business context. In the IPP module, a number of cross-cultural briefings were delivered by managers who were specialists in cultural intelligence (evidenced in the quote below). A cross-cultural boot camp was also delivered at the end of level 1 to provide a platform for level 2. Existing support structures in the University were highlighted to increase student awareness and uptake, such as opportunities for international work tours, comprising 2 weeks learning about business practices in specific cultures in level 1. Student uptake for these opportunities has increased from 1 (2018) to 5 (2019). A buddy system was also established whereby level 1 and 2 students could connect with a host

country national studying in their university to learn more about their culture pre-placement.

> ‘The cultural workshops helped me consider potential challenges and solutions and now I think I will be more equipped to deal with the issues I face’ (Student interview).

In a post-arrival context, the sense-check structures provided space for students to reflect on their cultural learnings and challenges. For the mid-way visits in particular, where students noted a lack of opportunities to speak the host language, placement companies were asked to organise classes. Furthermore, as a best practice, mentors would now at minimum converse with the student for an hour a week in the host language as well as providing opportunities to practice written language skills through email and report writing (as seen in the student reflection below). Prior to these visits, students were asked to fill out a survey to reflect on what cultural skills they had learned and how this could be improved. This survey information often provided examples of good practice such as joining local intercambio groups in Spain. These practices were shared by the visiting academics with other students as an opportunity to integrate with the local culture. Reflections demonstrated that some students recognised that living with other UK students limited their ability to integrate culturally. Some students chose to relocate during their placement where possible in order to avail of richer cultural and language experiences. For example, one student was supported in her relocation from Luxembourg, where she felt she was not getting enough opportunity to practice her French, to Paris. The mid-way visit also provided the students with a safe space to raise their concerns and ultimately improve their cultural experience overall.

> ‘My Spanish improved greatly when my boss introduced weekly meetings in Spanish…these meetings helped me to improve my professional working

> proficiency in the Spanish language as I was able to raise issues, discuss them and find solutions' (Student reflection)

In the repatriation stage a number of supports were introduced to enable students to reflect on their cultural learnings while on placement. Key here was a dedicated cross-cultural intelligence workshop mirroring the cultural briefing delivered in level 2. Again this was delivered by an industry cross-cultural specialist and facilitated student reflection on the broader application of their placement learning. In groups, students developed a 'cultural collage' of their placement learning which they presented back to level 2 students thus also enriching their expectations prior to leaving.

4.3 Personal adjustment

4.3.1 Challenges and support structures

The data illustrated the significant obstacles regarding personal adjustment on international placement. The focus groups raised a number of points necessitating support for accommodation, health, safety and counselling to name a few. Students noted it was often the basic practicalities that were overlooked but necessary for personal adjustment as highlighted in the quotes below. For example, the first couple of weeks surfaced challenges in navigating the city, local transport, knowing what areas to live, registering with local health services and making friends. Feedback from focus groups and interviews noted the absence of formal supports relating to these issues, which were then introduced across the placement stages. Additionally, the level 4 focus groups recounted their unawareness of protocol and emergency numbers when caught up in terrorist attacks in Paris and Barcelona.

> 'it was really really difficult to know how to sign up to the local health services…I had to take the morning off work one day to do it' (Focus group 1)

> ‘In Spain it is quite common not to get contracts for your house…and I had issues getting my deposit back…if I had known beforehand it would have helped (Focus group 1)

> ‘Overall more communication was needed while we were on placement’ (Focus group 2)

Support was rolled out through a number of initiatives. First, practical manuals were collated and disseminated detailing important information related to the above challenges. Maps of the main destination cities were provided with a breakdown of ‘safe areas’ to live. Local counselling and health facility contact details were included as well as increased signalling of the home University’s 24 counselling services and all emergency numbers. Further practical information briefings on health and safety, mental wellbeing and terrorist attacks were delivered to students by specialists from university services. Returned Level 4 students also compiled notes based on their experiences which were shared with level 2 students.

> ‘They [final years] were able to give us a real life perspective, offer specific advice about accommodation/areas to live etc. (Student interview)

> ‘The advice about resilience etc. was good and it is reassuring to know the university services are still available to us whilst on placement’ (Student interview)

Second, the sense-checks introduced in a post-arrival context surfaced a number of important personal support needs. For examples, students highlighted an absence of formal communication structures for their cohort. Thus, a Class Representative was nominated to facilitate the creation of this student-led support structure. Student details were exchanged and a student only Facebook group was created to share their experiences and organise weekend visits between class members. Companies were also

asked to provide students with practical information manuals upon arrival as part of their induction training. On occasion, the 2-week phone call identified student issues in either registering with local health services or gaining access to necessary medication. In these cases, the company mentor was asked to intervene. In conjunction with the placement companies, where possible, we also introduced a 'handover', comprising a week long overlap to facilitate training between arriving and departing students. These handovers proved an extremely positive support structure for both parties particularly in a personal capacity, as outlined in the below quote:

> 'I was mentored by the previous intern for two weeks...This proved to be very helpful as I got to familiarise myself with my new environment' (Student reflection)

Third, upon returning to their final year of studies, particular emphasis was placed on helping students re-adjust in a personal capacity. For example, as well as a dedicated repatriation workshop, each student had an individual appointment with the Program Directors. These were the same academics that conducted their mid-way visits, providing familiarity and continuity regarding challenges and learnings the students encountered on placement. Further, a peer nominated 'International Ambassador Initiative' was created for level 4 students. This acted as a forum for students returning from placement to reflect on and share their insights with level 2 students prior to departure. Generally, such structures created feedback loops at each stage of the placement process empowering students to become key stakeholders in co-producing support structures. Briefings on wellbeing and mental health were delivered by the academics early in the semester to update returning students on these supports evidenced in this quote;

> '[The one-to-one meetings] were helpful to refocus our attention on final year and cover any concerns we had personally about final year and our personal studies and goals' (Student interview)

---------- Table 2 to be inserted about here ----------

5.0 Theoretical implications and concluding comments

The main aim of this study was to explore how students may be supported to effectively manage the challenges of international placement. By addressing the shortcomings in current studies, and applying insights from research on international management, our study makes three important contributions. First, we identify a portfolio of support structures to help students manage the challenges associated with an international placement. Second, we contend these student support structures are best organised in consideration of three main adjustment challenges; professional, cultural, and personal. Third, supports to address these adjustment challenges need to be developed across three interrelated stages; pre-departure, post-arrival and repatriation stages. Viewing the international placement as a three stage process will provide other scholars with a structured and integrated way to support the student experience throughout their placement journey. Studies have largely failed to explore the importance of supporting students throughout the entire placement process, focusing instead on one stage over another (Auburn 2007; Dunlap and Mapp 2016). Therefore, we answer a call for more work to consider a holistic perspective of the supports that students require when undertaking international placements (Aamaas, Duesund, and Lauritzen 2019).

Our findings extend the above insights by arguing that each support structure should be geared toward particular learnings, depending on the stage they are developed. For example, the pre-departure stage needs to focus on support activities that

are structured around ‘preparation’ and ‘setting accurate expectations’. Research demonstrates that pre-departure workshops, classes and briefings are critical for setting accurate expectations (Dunlap and Mapp 2016; Selmer, 2001) and therefore avoiding cultural misunderstandings when working abroad (Caliguiri et al. 2001). We extend this research by arguing that briefings focused on professional, cultural and personal experiences, are effective for students to anticipate obstacles, particularly early in the placement. In the post-arrival stage, support activities should focus on ‘maintenance’ with ongoing communication as well as intervention mechanisms where needed. We developed a number of formalised sense-checks that allowed us to understand how students were coping with ongoing adjustment. Increased consistency across placement companies with formalised training, induction and mentors signalled to students a variety of supports were available throughout their journey. The mid-way visit in particular provided students with a ‘reflective space’ to air serious concerns they had with issues with mentorship, accommodation, finances or personal issues. Importantly, these sense-checks provided us with a vehicle for intervention where needed in that some students would be repatriated early from placement particularly if they had significant personal issues. These supports act as a way to manage the increased mental wellbeing obstacles that placement students face (Cage et al. 2018; Gelman and Baum 2010). Ultimately, we find that supports for individuals working abroad need to be sequentially developed in both pre-departure and post-arrival contexts (Conroy, McDonnell, and Holzleitner 2018).

Further, we find that the repatriation stage should emphasise the importance of ‘reflection’ with supporting structures developed to generate reflective learnings. Studies in international management demonstrate that individuals often feel underwhelmed upon re-entry as no support structures are in place to help them realise

and reflect on the value of their learnings from working abroad (Lazarova and Cerdin 2004; Moon 1999). We argue that providing students with reflective spaces post-placement, but prior to the commencement of their final year studies was an important support mechanism not present previously. This finding builds on other work in the literature that emphasises the importance of reflection for enhancing student experience after placement (Aamaas, Duesund, and Lauritzen 2019; Carson and Fisher 2006). Our work identifies a formalised re-entry workshop as well as follow up cultural briefings as examples of these reflective support structures.

Further, we find that it is important to view these three stages as interrelated, specifically, we identify the importance of introducing a 'feedback loop'. A feedback loop ensures that final year students are fully involved in co-producing support structures at each stage of the placement process thus facilitating the continuation of the action research spiral (Argyris, Putnam, and Smith 1985). In particular, we discover that students who return from placement should be actively involved in setting the expectations for level 2 students prior to international placement. This type of support structure allows students to become integrated into the education process, representing key stakeholders rather than passive consumers of bestowed learnings from academics (Auburn 2007; Reason and Bradbury 2001). Students are able to actualise what they learned in the practical arena on placement and apply it to the academic arena. In our study we formalised this feedback loop through initiatives such as the 'international ambassador initiative' which was integrated with the IPP module. In essence, this scheme acts as a support structure for level 2 students but provides final year students with a way to reflect on their learnings while also generating mentoring skills of their own, crucial for business students careers (Liu et al. 2011; Waibel et al. 2017).

Ultimately, our findings extend other work in the area of supporting placement students by introducing a more holistic way to consider how student learnings can be enhanced throughout the entire international placement journey. The study does have some limitations. We focused on one group of students (UK nationals with business degrees) but future work should look to explore how these findings can be generalised across groups. Also, our study did not intend to measure the benefits or outcomes of international placements, as this is already well documented in existing literature. Instead, we focused on surfacing the specific platform structures that academics and universities can develop to augment these outcomes. Future work could test the appropriateness of our support structures through a wide scale survey to ascertain their effectiveness. As higher education universities in the UK seek further internationalisation, they should be mindful that the necessary support structures are in place for enhancing student mobility and employment.

We wish to acknowledge the contribution of the international business students of the host university, as well as the placement office, companies, mentors and support staff.

References

Aamaas, Åsmund, Knut Duesund, and Solvor Mjøberg Lauritzen. 2019. “Placements abroad and scaffolding structures.” *Studies in Higher Education* 44 (3): 539-553.

Argyris, Chris, Robert Putnam, and Diana McLain Smith. 1985. *Action Science*. 13. Jossey-Bass Inc Pub.

Auburn, Timothy. 2007. “Identity and placement learning: student accounts of the transition back to university following a placement year.” *Studies in Higher Education* 32 (1): 117-133.

Baden, Denise, and Carole Parkes. 2013. “Experiential learning: Inspiring the business leaders of tomorrow.” *Journal of Management Development,* 32 (3): 295-308.

Batey, Jacqueline J., and Marsha H. Lupi. 2012. “Reflections on student interns' cultural awareness developed through a short-term international internship.” *Teacher Education Quarterly* 39 (3): 25-44.

Bradbury, Hilary, and Benyamin M. Bergmann Lichtenstein. 2000. “Relationality in organizational research: Exploring the space between.” *Organization Science* 11 (5): 551-564.

Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2006. “Using thematic analysis in psychology”. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77-101.

Brooks, Ruth, and Paul L. Youngson. 2016. “Undergraduate work placements: an analysis of the effects on career progression.” *Studies in Higher Education* 41 (9): 1563-1578.

Bryman, Alan. 2006. “Integrating quantitative and qualitative research: how is it done?” *Qualitative Research* 6 (1): 97-113.

Cage, Eilidh, Melissa Stock, Alex Sharpington, Emma Pitman, and Rachel Batchelor. 2018. “Barriers to accessing support for mental health issues at university.” *Studies in Higher Education* 1-13. DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2018.1544237

Caligiuri, Paula, Jean Phillips, Mila Lazarova, Ibraiz Tarique, and Peter Burgi, P. 2001. “The theory of met expectations applied to expatriate adjustment: The role of crosscultural training.” *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 12 (3): 357-372.

Carson, Lyn, and Kath Fisher. 2006. “Raising the bar on criticality: Students’ critical reflection in an internship program.” *Journal of Management Education* 30 (5): 700-723.

Clark, Sue Campbell. 2003. “Enhancing the educational value of business internships.” *Journal of Management Education* 27 (4): 472-484.

Coghlan, David. 2001. “Action research: Exploring perspectives on a philosophy of practical knowing.” *Academy of Management Annals* 5 (1): 53-87.

Conroy, Kieran M., Anthony McDonnell, and Katrin Holzleitner. 2018. “A race against time: training and support for short-term international assignments.” *Journal of Global Mobility* 6 (3/4): 299-315.

Conroy, Kieran M., David G. Collings, and Johanna Clancy. 2017. “Regional Headquarter’s Dual Agency Role: Micro-political Strategies of Alignment and Self-interest.” *British Journal of Management* 28 (3): 390-406.

Crabtree, Sara Ashencaen, Jonathan Parker, Azlinda Azman, and Dolly Paul Carlo. 2015. “Typologies of student experiences and constructed meanings of learning in international placements.” *Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work and Development* 25 (1): 42-53.

Creswell, John W., and Cheryl N. Poth. 2017. *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage Publications.

D’abate, Caroline P., Mark A. Youndt, and Kathryn E. Wenzel. 2009. “Making the most of an internship: An empirical study of internship satisfaction.” *Academy of Management Learning and Education* 8 (4): 527-539.

Davis, Richard, Shekhar Misra, and Stuart Van Auken. 2002. “A gap analysis approach to marketing curriculum assessment: A study of skills and knowledge.” *Journal of Marketing Education* 24, (3): 218-224.

Deutsch, Nancy L. 2004. “Positionality and the pen: Reflections on the process of becoming a feminist researcher and writer.” *Qualitative Inquiry* 10 (6): 885-902.

Diener, Edward, and Rick Crandall. 1978. *Ethics in Social and Behavioral Research*. University of Chicago Press.

Dunlap, Andy, and Susan C. Mapp. 2017. “Effectively preparing students for international field placements through a pre-departure class.” *Social Work Education* 36 (8): 893-904.

Eden, Colin, and Chris Huxham. 1996. “Action research for management research.” *British Journal of Management* 7 (1): 75-86.

Fox, Mim. 2017. “Student isolation: the experience of distance on an international field placement.” *Social Work Education* 36 (5): 508-520.

Gelman, Caroline Rosenthal, and Nehami Baum. 2010. “Social work students' pre-placement anxiety: An international comparison.” *Social Work Education* 29 (4): 427-440.

Gerken, Maike, Bart Rienties, Bas Giesbers, and Karen D. Könings. 2012. “Enhancing the academic internship learning experience for business education—a critical review and future directions.” In *Learning at the Crossroads of Theory and Practice*, 7-22. Springer, Dordrecht.

Gibbs, Graham. 1988. *Learning by Doing. A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods.* Further Education Unit.

Goodlad, Sinclair. 1997. “Responding to the perceived training needs of graduate teaching assistants.” *Studies in Higher Education* 22 (1): 83-92

Guillemin, Marilys, and Lynn Gillam. 2004. “Ethics, reflexivity, and “ethically important moments” in research.” *Qualitative Inquiry* 10 (2): 261-280.

Hiller, Gundula Gwenn, and Maja Woźniak. 2009. “Developing an intercultural competence programme at an international cross-border university.” *Intercultural Education* 20, (sup1): S113-S124.

Hodgson, David, Steve May, and Diane Marks-Maran. 2008. “Promoting the development of a supportive learning environment through action research from the ‘middle out’”. *Educational Action Research* 16 (4): 531-544.

King, Nigel. 2004. “Using templates in the thematic analysis of text.” In *Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organizational Research* edited by Catherine Cassell and Gillian Symon, 256-70. Sage.

Kitzinger, Jenny. 1994. “The methodology of focus groups: the importance of interaction between research participants.” *Sociology of Health and Illness* 16 (1): 103-121.

Lazarova, Mila B., and Jean-Luc Cerdin. 2007. “Revisiting repatriation concerns: Organizational support versus career and contextual influences.” *Journal of International Business Studies* 38 (3): 404-429.

Lewin, Kurt. 1946. “Action research and minority problems.” *Journal of Social Issues* 2 (4): 34-46.

Liu, Yongmei, Jun Xu, and Barton A. Weitz. 2011 “The role of emotional expression and mentoring in internship learning.” *Academy of Management Learning and Education* 10 (1): 94-110.

Moon, Jennifer. 1999. “Learning journals.” *A handbook for academics, students and professional*. Kogan Page.

Neill, Neville, Gwyneth Mulholland, Vilinda Ross, and Janet Leckey. 2004. “The influence of part-time work on student placement.” *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 28 (2): 123-137.

Nowell, Lorelli S., Jim M. Norris, Deborah E. White, and Nancy J. Moules. 2017. “Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria.” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *16* (1): 1-13.

Orahood, Tammy, Larisa Kruze, and Denise Easley Pearson. “The Impact of Study Abroad on Business Students' Career Goals.” *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 10 (2004): 117-130.

Parasuraman, Anantharanthan, Valarie A. Zeithaml, and Leonard L. Berry. 1985 “A conceptual model of service quality and its implications for future research.” *Journal of Marketing* 49 (4): 41-50.

Pedro, Joan Daniels. 1984. “Induction into the workplace: The impact of internships.” *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 25 (1): 80-95.

Peltokorpi, Vesa. 2008. “Cross-cultural adjustment of expatriates in Japan.” *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 19 (9): 1588-1606.

Prestwich, Roger, and Thu-Mai Ho-Kim. 2007. “Knowledge, skills and abilities of international business majors: What we teach them versus what companies need them to know.” *Journal of Teaching in International Business* 19, (1): 29-55.

Puck, Jonas F., Markus G. Kittler, and Christopher Wright. 2008. “Does it really work? Re-assessing the impact of pre-departure cross-cultural training on expatriate adjustment.” *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*. 19 (12): 2182-2197.

Reason, Peter, and Hilary Bradbury, eds. 2001. *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice*. Sage.

Roberts, Elizabeth Huettman. 1998. “The innocents abroad: Do students face international internships unprepared?.” *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly* 39 (4): 64-69.

Roy, Achinto, Alexander Newman, Tori Ellenberger, and Amanda Pyman. 2018. “Outcomes of international student mobility programs: a systematic review and agenda for future research.” *Studies in Higher Education*: 1-15.

Sadler, Ian. 2012. “The challenges for new academics in adopting student-centred approaches to teaching” *Studies in Higher Education* 37 (6): 731-745.

Seeber, Marco, Michele Meoli, and Mattia Cattaneo. 2018. “How do European higher education institutions internationalize?.” *Studies in Higher Education*: 1-18.

Selmer, Jan. 2001. “The preference for predeparture or postarrival cross-cultural training–an exploratory approach.” *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 16 (1): 50-58.

Shay, Jeffrey, and Sally Baack. 2004. “Expatriate assignment, adjustment and effectiveness: An empirical examination of the big picture.” *Journal of International Business Studies* 35 (3): 216-232.

Sison, Marianne D., and Linda Brennan. 2012. “Students as global citizens: strategies for mobilizing studies abroad.” *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* 22 (2): 167-181.

Smith, Karen, Sue Clegg, Elizabeth Lawrence, and Malcolm J. Todd. 2007. “The challenges of reflection: students learning from work placements.” Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 44 (22): 131-141.

Stewart, Jim, and Vanessa Knowles. 2003. “Mentoring in undergraduate business management programmes.” *Journal of European Industrial Training* 27 (2/3/4): 147-159.

Stitts, D. Kathleen. 2006. “Learning to work with emotions during an internship.” *Business Communication Quarterly* 69 (4): 446-449.

Succi, Chiara, and Magali Canovi. 2019. “Soft skills to enhance graduate employability: comparing students and employers’ perceptions.” *Studies in Higher Education*: 1-14.

Toncar, Mark F., and Brian V. Cudmore. 2000. “The overseas internship experience.” *Journal of Marketing Education* 22 (1): 54-63.

Touboulic, Anne, and Helen Walker. 2016. “A relational, transformative and engaged approach to sustainable supply chain management: The potential of action research.” *Human Relations* 69 (2): 301-343.

Touboulic, Anne and Lucy McCarthy. 2019. “Collective Action in SCM: A Call for activist research” *International Journal of Logistics Management* (forthcoming).

Tymon, Alex. “The student perspective on employability.” 2013. *Studies in Higher Education* 38 (6): 841-856.

Waibel, Stine, Heiko Rüger, Andreas Ette, and Lenore Sauer. 2017. “Career consequences of transnational educational mobility: A systematic literature review.” *Educational Research Review* 20: 81-98.

Figure 1: The action research spiral

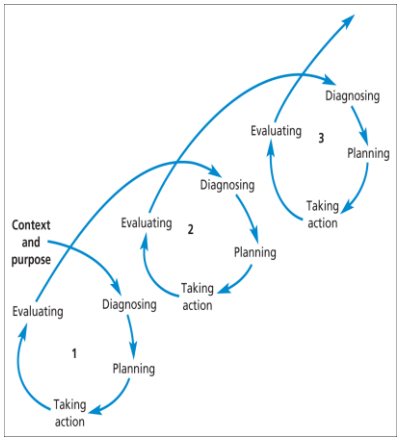

Table 1: Data collection stages

Intervention	Method	# Students	Date	Placement stage	Purpose	Duration
Pre-intervention	**Focus Group 1**	19	09/2017	Repatriation	Retrospective reflections of placement experience	2 hours
	Focus Group 2	13	10/2018			
	Student Reflections	32	06/2017 – 07/2018	Post-arrival	Ongoing reflections monthly regarding student learnings while on placement	2,000 words
	Interviews	45	02/2018 (23) 02/2019 (22)		Real time mid-way understanding of student challenges and learnings while on placement	45 minutes
Post-intervention	**Interviews**	22	04/2019	Pre-departure	Gathering student reflections on the pre-departure training received	30 – 40 minutes
	Interviews	21	04/2019	Repatriation	Reflections on final year supports	

Table 2: International placement support structures

Adjustment dimension	**Placement stages**		
	1. Pre-departure *(level 2)*	**2. Post-arrival** *(on placement)*	**3. Repatriation** *(level 4)*
	Support structures		
	Placement preparation module	*Series of formalised sense-checks*	*Reflective reintegration*

1. Professional	• Employer Insight Events
	• Mock interviews, LinkedIn and CV workshops
	• Insight talks from current and previous placement students
	• Summer internship opportunities post level 1
	• School placement website with jobs advertised
		• Formalised sense-checks:
		  ○ 2 week phone call
		  ○ 3 month (virtual) check-in
		  ○ 6 month mid-way visit from academic staff
		  ○ Departure survey
		• Formalised induction and training from placement company
		• Formal company mentor and formal academic mentor
			• Dedicated IB career workshops
			• Embedded module discussions
			• Reflective assessments linking learning from placement
			• Prize ceremony for most improved placement student (nominated by company mentor)
			• Dedicated IB alumni talks

2. Cultural	• New business language module (increased focus on workplace skills) • Insight talks from current and previous placement students • Cross-cultural briefings and simulations • Cross-cultural ‘bootcamp’ (level 1) • International study tour	• Visits from academic staff • Language training with company (if needed) • Weekly language debriefs with company mentor • Joining local language and cultural groups	• Cross-cultural reflection workshop • Dedicated language classes • Continuation of buddy system • Application of cultural learnings through feedback to level 2 students

	opportunities post level 1 • Language buddy system		
3. Personal	• Practical information briefings • Practical information manuals • Health and safety briefings • Wellbeing training briefings	• Visits from academic staff • 24 hour counselling service • Accommodation assistance from placement company • Student handovers • Class Representative and Facebook group • Company practical information manuals	• Individual meetings with Program Director and Advisor of Studies • Reflective reports • International Ambassador initiative • Wellbeing and mental health briefings